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If the Gospel Narratives are
Mythical—What then?



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**IF THE GOSPEL NARRATIVES ARE
MYTHICAL—WHAT THEN?**

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IF THE GOSPEL NARRATIVES ARE
MYTHICAL—WHAT THEN?

“Qu'ils apprennent au moins quelle est la religion qu'ils combattent, avant
que de la combattre.”—PASCAL.



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PREFACE.

A FEW copies of this tract having been printed about a twelvemonth ago, and dispersed among friends, I find that its purpose has in some respects been a little misunderstood, and one or two notes of explanation may therefore not be quite out of place here.

1. It is no part of my intention to cast doubts either on the inspiration of Scripture, or on the historical credibility of any part of it. I simply leave all consideration of these questions out of view—pronouncing no opinion on the one side or the other, and proceed at once to argue with those who have such doubts, that even if these could be conclusively shown to be well founded, it does not affect the truth of what Christianity teaches. I may add to this, that the title which I have chosen is not meant to imply that I consider the historical truth of Christianity unimportant. The meaning which I attach to the words “What then?” is not, as I find has been supposed—What matter is it?—but simply, What follows?—or, What conclusions may be drawn?

2. I do not pretend in these pages to establish on grounds of observation or experience the *whole* circle of Christian doctrine. All that I attempt to show is

that certain central or fundamental truths (as I regard them) of Christianity are capable of being so established. There may be a difference of opinion, indeed, as to whether these truths really do constitute the characteristic and essential substance of Christianity. But without entering into any dispute on this head, it is, I think, certain that in the manner I have indicated the special personal relations of God to every individual are plainly discoverable. It is shown too, that not only access to, but the closest possible communion with, God may be attained, and that reconciliation, gratitude, trust and love towards Him, may take full possession of the soul, without previously determining the gospels to be either inspired or historical. This may not be the whole of Christianity—I nowhere say that it is—but it is at all events a very material part of it, and it is surely some gain to the Christian evidence if so much may be reached without reference to, and altogether independently of, any investigation into the confessedly difficult and stumbling questions of inspiration and historical credibility. I am quite content that what I have written should be pronounced imperfect and fragmentary; they who are able to receive it, let them receive it, and take what comfort it brings them; the rest who see nothing in it can leave it alone.

3. Nothing that I have said ought to be regarded as interfering in any way with other doctrines of

Christianity not here referred to. To say (which is all that I have done) that this or that truth is capable of being inductively proved from facts of observation and experience, does not surely imply that everything else is to be thrown to the winds, and that what depends on merely probable evidence is henceforth to go for nothing. On the contrary, I rather venture to anticipate that the natural effect of such an attempt as mine will be to prepare the minds of readers for going a good deal further in the acceptance of evangelic thought than I have here brought them. But whether this shall be the case or not, I at least raise no obstacle to the belief of any other truth which may be considered important or necessary. I am not aware that I deny anything, that I exclude anything, that I interfere with anything in the theological opinions of any class or section of Christians whatsoever. It is true that, in writing freely on the subject of Religion, it is seldom quite easy to avoid indicating that some theory or opinion—not quite agreeable to every reader—may be floating in one's mind, and that there is an entire absence of everything of this kind in these pages, it would be very rash in me to assert. But if such offensive matter is anywhere apparent, I shall be glad if the reader will do me the courtesy of simply putting it aside—disconnecting his mind from it altogether, attaching no importance to it, and keep-

ing it if possible entirely out of view. The argument which runs through what I have written is, I believe, perfectly capable of being maintained apart from all such extraneous matter, and I am very anxious that it should be in no way hampered by it.

4. It may be desirable to caution the reader against supposing that in the account which I have given of the struggle of the soul against sin, anything more than the general nature of that struggle is meant to be described. I should not wish it to be thought that I attempt to delineate the precise features of every individual case. Anything of this kind would be sure to fail, for it may well be doubted if any two experiences have ever been exactly similar. In this alone, I believe, they will be found to agree—that all self-effort to extricate one's-self from sin, and to attain to righteousness, is completely baffled; and not till the utter hopelessness of our own endeavours have become distinctly apparent to us, and till we have been forced to look to the Unseen for strength, does the power ever arise within us to overcome evil and follow good. There is a distinct consciousness of a want in our own nature, and there is a distinct consciousness of a supply of that want from some source out of ourselves—which source we are shut up to infer is—God. This is all that I should wish to assert. Every one must make the experiment for himself: I merely attempt to indicate how it should be conducted.

IF THE GOSPEL NARRATIVES ARE MYTHICAL—WHAT THEN ?

AT a time when it is so common to call in question not only the inspired character of the Scriptures, but even the historical truth of the Gospel narratives, it may be worth while to inquire how far the faith of Christianity is dependent on either of these foundations, and whether it may not be possible to show that the Christian verity is capable of being maintained though the evangelic records should turn out to be purely mythical, and though what is called Divine inspiration should be admitted to be merely the inspiration of genius or the profound insight of a wise philosophy. In other words, taking up the New Testament as if it were a book of whose history we know nothing beyond the simple fact that somehow or other it has been cast ashore at our feet by the sea of time,—what is it possible to make of it? what lessons can we learn from it? what conclusions can we draw?

Nothing is more certain than that many persons are naturally, in a great measure, destitute of what may be called historical imagination. They fail to realize vividly the great events of long-past time, and their understandings especially shrink with a kind of instinctive recoil from the acceptance of facts, which, like the miracles of the Gospels, diverge widely from the common order of nature. This doubting or sceptical constitution of mind is often no way connected with any spiritual aversion to Christianity. On the contrary, it is to be found in those who are strongly attracted by its moral loveliness, and who sigh to attain its faith. It is purely intellectual in its character, it extends to everything else as well as to Christianity, and not seldom it is more symptomatic of a well-constituted intellect than the opposite disposition to ready credulity. Now, it is difficult to suppose, indeed it is quite inconceivable, that men of this order of mind should, by reason merely of the exceptional soundness of their mental constitution, be precluded from appropriating the faith of the gospel,—should even have less ready access to God than those who happen to be only a little more apt to credit unquestioningly what is told them. A system so broad and large as Christianity, one which presents so many sides to our contemplation, and one too which (if of Divine origin) was unquestionably intended by its author

for the benefit of the whole human race, must be approachable surely by more avenues than one. I can conceive it, therefore, to be argued with considerable force and plausibility, that to ask, not What authority does Christianity carry? but, What does it teach? is a perfectly legitimate, or even the only legitimate, way of entering upon the investigation of its truth, and that such a method of inquiry is not merely one to which we are driven by the exigencies of temporary controversies or passing fashions of thought.

I can conceive a man of the sceptical temper I have described, yet interested in the question of Christian truth, to argue the matter somewhat on this wise:—"Even of those," he might urge, "who most strongly insist upon the necessity of accepting the external evidences of Christianity, few, if any, will venture to maintain that these alone are sufficient to make a man a Christian. Some kind of 'personal faith' in its truths is also held to be indispensable to that end, *i.e.*, as I understand it, some kind of close and intimate conversance with the subject-matter of so-called revelation, apart altogether from any consideration of the infallible authority alleged to belong to it."

He might then add, "It is a plain fact of observation that the great majority of those who have fully accepted the faith of the gospel—of those, too,

among whom Christianity often shows its purest and noblest aspect, viz., poor and ignorant persons, the uneducated and half-educated, children and women—are quite incapable of forming a judgment upon such critical and metaphysical questions as go to the determination of the inspired character of the Bible and its historical credibility. In *their* case, therefore, may it not be said to be fully ascertained that Christian faith does not rest either upon any intelligent belief of the doctrine of inspiration or upon any duly formed conclusion as to the validity of the historical evidence? Both of these have been simply assumed by them; and their faith, consequently, is founded upon some mental process entirely distinct from that sort of reasoning which it is so common to regard as fundamental in religion. And if in their case, why not in others?"

Still further he might say, "Even on a *prima facie* examination of the matter, it must, I think, be apparent that Christian faith is something totally different in kind from that sort of belief which is derived from the crediting of any historical testimony, or reliance on any infallible authority. A religious faith based upon such foundations could be only a continuous exercise of the logical faculty: 'God has spoken thus or thus: therefore it must be true, and therefore I must believe and act in conformity to it.' But this surely is not the formula

of the Christian consciousness. Implicit belief is, in fact, contradictory of all that I understand to be most peculiarly characteristic of the faith of Christianity. And such a state of mind as the above formula represents would be apt to end in weariness, disgust, and aversion to all good ; whereas, if there be any truth in Christianity at all, and if the representations of it given in the New Testament are to be taken as correctly setting forth its pretensions, its influence prevails as much over the secret thoughts as over the outward conduct. The feeling of the Christian, therefore, is that of positive love to goodness, and hatred of sin. Christianity enters into his taste even before it penetrates to his reason : it is an active, pervading moral and spiritual feeling even more than an intellectual conviction."

And finally he might ask, "How does a man come to believe in the Divine inspiration of the Scriptures at all? Is it not simply by recognising the deep, searching, penetrating truth of which they are supposed to be full? Their own nature, it is alleged by Christians, both in its strength and its weakness, its transcendent capability for good and its irresistible tendency towards evil, is brought before them in a light in which they never saw it before, and with a truthfulness of delineation which their consciousness cannot resist. And the Divine

nature is manifested with an art and power which awaken a response in the deepest instincts of their souls. They then seem to feel that no human intellect could have thus penetrated into the trackless and innermost recesses of truth and wisdom ; and, accordingly, they infer that the authors of the Bible must have been guided by some higher intelligence than their own—by that of the Divine Spirit itself. But, if this be the process by which the belief in inspiration is formed, it must inevitably follow that that belief is not the beginning or foundation of an investigation into the truth of Christianity, but the ultimate result of it. Nay more, the belief in inspiration cannot even have any relevancy to a faith in Christianity ; for if I have already believed the subject-matter of the Scriptures to be true, it can be of no consequence to prove, in addition to this, that the authors of the Scriptures were inspired.”

Now, whether we accept this pleading in its utmost extent or not, it must at least be admitted that it contains a perfectly fair representation of a real feeling in a large class of minds, and that there is enough of truth in it to instigate strongly the inquiry—Upon what grounds, independent of their inspiration and historical credibility, do we come to be satisfied of the truth of the religious

teaching of the Scriptures? To this question, therefore, I am now about to attempt an answer.

There are two ways of acquiring knowledge: either we must be informed of it by others, or we must ascertain it for ourselves. Knowledge has of late made such strides, and has now become so varied and extensive, that it is impossible for every one to ascertain the truth of all things by personal investigation. And we are a little apt to overlook the fact that by far the larger part of what is called knowledge, as it exists in the minds of those who are supposed to possess it, is not, properly speaking, knowledge at all, but simply information taken upon trust from others. Of this kind is most of the knowledge we get at schools, or colleges, or out of books. And I half suspect that whenever we speak of a man of great knowledge, we almost invariably mean one whose knowledge consists of results only,—not one who has acquired his knowledge by direct experience. Indeed, we hardly think of this latter as being “intelligent,” “accomplished,” or “well-informed” at all. In general, he is spoken of as “a mere practical man,” as one who is “nothing out of his profession,” as “no philosopher,” and as “a person quite destitute of general intelligence.” Now, what I wish to draw attention to is this, that in investigating the question of the truth of Christianity, it is exclusively this latter kind of

knowledge that can be of any service to us. It is of no use to examine Christianity in a speculative way; it must be studied like a trade or a profession, if we would come to any conclusion as to its truth or falsehood. Its verities are nearly all latent; they are not in the line of abstract speculation at all; many of them go right in the teeth of what speculative investigation would lead us to conclude; and it is only when subjected to close, personal, practical inspection by the method of trial and experiment that they come to light.

An example or two of the manner in which such subtle and latent truths as those of which Christianity consists are incidentally and unexpectedly evolved in the course of some act or practice or *doing* of some kind, may be of use to indicate what I mean.

On merely looking at a crude mass of rock, the idea of its constitution or mode of formation which we naturally take up would probably be that it is simply a hard compact aggregate of particles, and no one would readily suspect beforehand what might be the exact effect of the stroke of a hammer or of a chisel and mallet upon it. But stone-hewers and sculptors are well aware that every different kind of rock has its peculiar "lay," and their practised eye enables them at once to tell in what direction it will most readily split or scale off. Hence the

remarkable precision with which a skilled hand will in a few minutes reduce a shapeless block to the exact form desired. Michael Angelo, we are told, used to astonish all who saw him by the almost incredible rapidity with which he could cut down an immense piece of marble to the precise shape which he wished. "With the most extraordinary fire and impetuosity," it is said, "he would smite off huge fragments so close upon his mark that a few hair-breadths more would have entirely ruined his work." Now this was evidently due to some kind of special knowledge both of the properties and capabilities of the marble, and of the tools he was using, which nothing but long and close practical acquaintance and experience with these could have imparted.

It is the same in any other profession. Dr. John Brown in one of his Essays mentions that when a young man commencing practice as a physician, he was one day called in to a patient who appeared to be suffering from virulent disease of the stomach. None of the remedies which he applied, however, had the smallest effect in mitigating the complaint, and in his perplexity he consulted the late Dr. Abercrombie, and took that eminent physician to visit his patient. Dr. Abercrombie, as his manner was, sauntered up to the bedside, drew aside the curtains, and gave a slight, momentary, and apparently careless glance at the sick man, and with-

out asking a single question, immediately came away. He then took Dr. Brown aside, said that there was no disease of the stomach at all, but hopeless malady of the brain; told him what symptoms would immediately ensue, and intimated that the man would die in two or three days. And everything turned out exactly as he had foretold. In this case, also, there is evidently the same close subtle result of long and minute observation and experience—some species of knowledge which even Dr. Abercrombie himself would probably have been quite unable to define or account for, and which he, therefore, could not have communicated to others, but which was not the less to him clear, distinct, well-established truth.

Even in matters of feeling and sentiment we may often observe the same process of mind at work, and with the same result. Fifty years ago the poetry of Wordsworth was condemned and reviled as wanting every true constituent of poetry—as full of dull stupidities, of low ideas, and of false conceptions of things. But at an after period he came to be held in the deepest veneration, and by many he was classed among the greatest poets and wisest thinkers that the world had ever seen. Now, how was this extraordinary change brought about in men's minds? Why was Wordsworth at first misconceived and despised, afterwards honoured and applauded? The

reason, I think, is something like this:—The objects of Wordsworth's contemplation, the subjects of his poetry, were to a great degree new; the character of his style was an innovation upon what had hitherto been the common phraseology of poetry; and his ideas and associations were very much out of the old tracks of thought. Hence men's minds were unprepared at once to follow in the course which he led them. They were startled and repelled, and failed to sympathize with what was strange and foreign to their modes of thinking and feeling, and they therefore hastily condemned the poet for what was in reality owing to a defect in their own spirits. But by and by men began, hesitatingly at first, but soon with increasing interest and confidence, to attend to Wordsworth's thoughts, to live over again the life which he lived, to watch and observe material nature under the aspects and amid the peculiar scenery in which it fell upon his eye; they ceased to turn with indifference, as they had perhaps hitherto done, from the common objects of nature, the more ordinary combinations of earth and sky, and the more lowly forms of human life and character in which he delighted. And then they soon discovered how truthful had been Wordsworth's observation, how full of beauty those objects of contemplation which had hitherto been carelessly passed by by all but him, how full of subtle truth.

his interpretations of nature, how profound his insight, and how noble and exalting his teaching. In a word, placing themselves in Wordsworth's position, taking up his point of view, repeating his observations, undergoing his experience, they were able for the first time to feel the force and truth and beauty and worth of his poetical utterances, they saw with their own eyes the truth which he had seen, they found their hearts swayed by the feeling which had moved him.

Now in all these cases, be it observed, there was no powerful effort of the reasoning faculties required, no delicate critical speculation or deep searching inquiries, but simply close practical acquaintance with the subject-matter to be dealt with. And this is just what I maintain to be necessary in the investigation of Christianity.

Without attempting to offer a comprehensive definition of Christianity, I may describe it as being, in one of its aspects, the art of living a good life. If I were disposed to indulge in a paradox, I might perhaps say that Christianity is not a religion at all, much less a theology, and that if it brings to light any religious truths whatever, this is effected simply as the indirect result of the practical effort of our minds to attain to spiritual perfection. I do not, however, make any assertion of this kind, and I do not wish to put

forth any such exclusive conception of the religion of Christ. But at the same time, in what I have at present to say, I shall chiefly regard Christianity as an art of life, and as evolving its truths, incidentally as it were, in this practical experimental way. Convinced that this is the most direct and effective way of testing the claims of this alleged revelation to our attention and belief, I shall perhaps be pardoned if I sometimes use language which may appear to exclude the idea of Christianity possessing any other character, or of its being looked at from any other point of view.

Almost as soon as we awaken to the fact of our own existence, we become aware of the infinite contradictions by which we are surrounded. Our very nature is full of opposing principles. One part of it seems almost as if it were set up in contravention of the other. Our desires are strong; our power of attaining the objects of our desire often very weak. We wish to be happy, but the very mode in which we attempt to carry out that wish, the very concentration of thought and effort upon it, often leads only to our being very miserable. We desire to be good and pure, but our natural impulses are perpetually leading us into vice and baseness. We have an intense enjoyment of life, and a strong persuasion of its further capabilities of enjoyment, but the very strength and quickness of

our susceptibilities make us the more apt to fall into the deepest griefs, disappointments, and sorrows; and so slight is our hold on that life which we prize so intensely, that we never know certainly that it will be continued to us for another hour. We feel within ourselves the principles of a far higher and nobler life than that which we lead here, and as these have no proper sphere or outlet now, we suspect that there must be another life beyond the grave. And such strong possession of us does this feeling often take, that it sometimes seems to us that all that belongs to this world is the merest vanity, and that our most reasonable course would be to spend our time only in preparing for another. But when we make the attempt, so faint within us do we find the active powers of that higher life to be, and so little capable are we of cherishing their growth and development, that the very prospect of immortality, instead of being a ground of hope or consolation, becomes to us the occasion of alarm and terror.

All these contradictions, chagrins, miseries, tend to throw back our thoughts upon the Author of our being. Why has He made us thus? we ask. Why has He involved us in all this agonizing struggle and controversy with our own condition and our own selves? And might He not even yet be induced, by some change either in our outward cir-

cumstances or inward feelings, to impart a true balance and harmony to our minds?

Change of outward circumstances—this is what, before anything else, we are apt to lay hold of as offering a likely means of escape from evil. We do not readily admit that the root of the mischief may be in ourselves, but we are easily fascinated with the idea that if some alteration could be effected in our outward condition, we might not only become happier, but that our characters would also be raised and purified, and so tranquillity be transfused into our souls. If we could only have a new sphere of activity, a better position in life, greater leisure for mental culture or for some special pursuit to which we have attached a fond importance, some freedom from temptations which we are too weak ourselves to burst loose from, some more congenial friends or fitting society, or—something else, we know not what, we fancy that all would be well with us. And acting on this view, it may be that we address to the Deity prayers and entreaties for such things. The result is that we fail, or that we succeed; but either way, we find that we are as far from happiness as ever; we have miscalculated the depth of the evil, and the efficacy of outward things to change our inward character, and the conclusion is at last forced upon us that not by such help are purity and elevation of life or tranquillity of spirit to be procured.

Baffled in this direction, we then think, perhaps, that if we could only discover in God's works a clear display of His character and of His disposition towards us, we might be so drawn to Him by love and gratitude as to find in these a regulating principle of conduct, enabling us to eschew evil and to follow good. Then, acting upon this view, and thinking that nothing could afford a more clear or ample view of the Divine goodness than the contemplation of the laws of nature in that material world which is so constantly open to our senses and so closely present to our understandings, we proceed to study the evidences of God's power, wisdom, and goodness therein so fully displayed. But when we try to establish a motive to love or gratitude to the Deity upon such a foundation, we speedily find it to be in various ways very insecure and defective. For even admitting that the general order of nature is such as to indicate that God intended the well-being and happiness of His creatures, it is still unquestionable that neither the one nor the other is secured by it. Such, indeed, is the complication of human affairs, such the diversity of operation as regards individuals, in the laws by which the world is guided, that evil and calamity to an altogether illimitable extent are the inevitable result of the existing constitution of things. And it may even be said that some of the arrangements of nature

seem to be directly calculated to produce only misery and mischief. But leaving these considerations out of view, I fear it must still be said that a wisdom and beneficence which are manifested only in general laws, *i.e.*, in arrangements of wide or universal application, are very little fitted to call forth in individual men any sense of close personal relationship or obligation to the Divine Being. I question if any other feelings are capable of being excited by the contemplation of the beneficence of nature than those of wonder, admiration, and curiosity. Deity, in fact, becomes to us simply an object of scientific inquiry, and every warmer feeling disappears in the calm weighing of probabilities and the absorbing but purely intellectual interest of a perplexed problem. Nay more, I can even imagine a man to accept frankly and fully all the ordinary conclusions of what is called Natural Theology, and yet to argue that, as God had seen fit to create man, He ~~was~~ morally bound to make provision for his preservation and happiness; that anything short of this would have amounted to simple malignity in the Creator; and that, therefore, the Divine Being had thereby established no claim whatever to any return of love or gratitude from His creatures, no title to demand that they should regulate their life and conduct according to His will, rather than by their own instincts. This reasoning may be right or

wrong, but at all events it is very generally acted on; and whether the one or the other, I am very sure of this, that, as human nature is constituted, any contemplation of God's goodness, as displayed in the natural world, has the smallest possible effect in inducing men to do good and to avoid sin.

Turning, then, from the manifestation of God's perfections which is made in outward nature, to that delineation of Him which Christianity offers, it is curious to remark that all those characteristics of the former manifestation which are so confusing, perplexing, and indeed utterly baffling to reason, have no place in the New Testament exhibition of the Deity. That delineation consists of two parts: the first exhibiting God as He appears in the miraculous works which are attributed to Christ; and the second, as He is to be seen in the extraordinary character of Christ himself.

I. As to the Christian miracles, it is to be remarked that none of them brought terror or evil to mankind; the whole of them were of a beneficent character. And instead of that beneficence being shown by operations like those which result from a universal law, by acts, *i.e.*, of a widely diffusive kind, capable of affecting mankind at large, or even great masses of men, every one of Christ's miracles was simply a display of love and kindness to an indi-

vidual.¹ He healed the sick one by one, even when they came in crowds, laying His hands upon each person successively, and suiting His gifts to the circumstances of every several case. And so far were His miracles from being mere random displays of good-will, that in some instances we may even discern the presence of such discriminating beneficence as distinctly marks the existence of strong personal sympathy in the exercise of Divine power. In cases of ordinary sickness or disease, indeed, He is represented as making no selection; all who came to Him shared equally in His beneficent power. But only three instances are recorded of His bringing the dead to life again, and in each of them it is inevitable to remark that the motive of His interference with the course of nature must have originated in His special sympathy with human love and grief, in some of their purest, tenderest, and most delicate forms. In the first, a poor widowed mother is mourning over the death of her only son; in the next, an only daughter has been taken from her parents just at the age when the child is passing into the woman, and girlhood is most lovely and engaging; and in the last, two gentle loving sisters have lost an only brother, who was all in all to them.

¹ The miracle of the loaves and fishes is the only apparent exception which I remember to this remark.

Throughout the Gospel story, in short, we find God exhibited as acting (through Christ), with all the power of Deity indeed, but under the limitations of humanity, and as if standing in the simple relation of one man to another. We meet with none of that complication in His acts of beneficence towards mankind which vexes and perplexes us in the great operations of nature,—no mixing of evil with good, no permitting of the hard inexorable law to crush one while it raises up another. The Deity appears before us acting according to the simple direct intention of His beneficent nature, and the inconsistencies and incoherences inseparable from a system of fixed and uniform law seem all to be reconciled. Could we see God always acting in this way, our difficulties in comprehending the relation in which we stand to Him, and the indifference with which we are apt to regard Him, would both be at an end.

That this is the general conception of the Divine Being which is set forth in the miracles of Christ is, of course, plain enough, but, though it may have the effect of a digression, I should like to draw attention for a moment to the exquisite skill, and, if I may so speak, artistic treatment, with which the idea is worked out by the evangelic writers, or, if we take it for a real manifestation of Deity, by the Divine Artist himself.

1st, Any one familiar with the monstrous, grotesque, and bizarre character of the ordinary miracles of fable, must be struck with the simple dignity and nobleness of those which are attributed to Christ. Not only have they all a worthy beneficent purpose in view, but the ends effected by them seem to me to express exactly what the heart, amid the general and expansive beneficence of nature, anxiously longs for and would fain believe in,—a special personal feeling of tenderness and regard in the Deity towards each individual among us. It may be added, that though general nature does not contain any articulate intimation of this kind of personal reference to individuals, such a thing may yet appear to be hinted at by the exceeding care and nicety with which, in natural laws, we see provision sometimes made for very special ends in the wellbeing of God's creatures. When we see the Divine Being condescending to exercise the most minute care, and making the most refined contrivances to guard against the smallest possible evils and risks to His creatures, and to impart the most exquisite finish to their happiness, it seems hardly any extension of the inference which we draw as to the character of His beneficence, to say that He must also have regard to what befalls every individual among us. He who is capable of the one must, as it seems, be capable of the other also. And this is just what the

evangelic representation is to be taken as expressly declaring.

2d, Though the miracles of the New Testament may in some sense be said to be deviations from natural law, it is remarkable that in the ends effected they exactly concur with the ordinary character of God's works. In them all the Divine power is represented as doing the very same things which we find it doing day by day in the operations of external nature. Christ gave life to the dead—and so also does nature every day and all day long infuse new life into being. He heals sickness,—and nothing is more characteristic of nature than the recuperative and sanative power which it puts forth wherever disease or disorder obtains: indeed physicians tell us that all disease is simply the effort of the bodily constitution to throw off some malignant principle which has found its way into it. He stills the storm—and are not the tempest and the whirlwind only the irresistible tendings of nature towards calm? He changes water into wine—and nature also, by its inscrutable power, is for ever transposing its elemental atoms and substances into new forms and combinations.

3d, Another close analogy to nature is observable in the mode in which effects are represented as being produced in Christ's miracles. The result only is ever seen, the power which causes it is

uniformly kept out of view. A touch or a word is the only means which Christ is represented to have employed, and the effect intended followed, no one could tell how. It is just the same retiring modesty that is to be seen in nature. There, too, the Divine power is quite unobtrusive; no direct display of it ever appears, no effort commensurate to the effect produced. We place the seed in the earth, for example, and vitality is imparted to the plant, we know not how. So silently, darkly, and with such deep inscrutable reserve does the cause work, that we may even question, and, alas! we sometimes do question, if God's power is present at all; we babble about natural laws, necessary causes, and so on, and the events which occur hardly suggest the thought of their proceeding from His hand. And so in Christ's miracles: so little does He obtrude Himself in them, so slightly does He connect Himself with the effect He produces, that we might, consistently enough, indulge ourselves in the same questionings as to whether He is their author or not. The great power which He displays scarcely seems to be vested in Himself, and for aught that appears He might be merely the medium of some greater power behind Him. It is left wholly to intelligent reflection to draw a finer inference, and to pious thought to connect the Divine Worker with the Divine work.

Thus, then, the elements apparent in Christ's miraculous works are—(1.) A representation of the Divine Being as producing certain effects with a special view to the material benefit—not of mankind in the mass, but—of individual men only. (2.) These special effects exhibited, as brought about in a manner curiously accordant with, and in subordination to, the general laws of Divine procedure, as these are to be seen operating in the ordinary course of nature. (3.) It may be added that these special arrangements for the conveyance of temporal blessings to individuals are not set forth as of regular or uniform occurrence, but only as occasional and exceptional. It is not alleged in the Gospels that all death, disease, and misery ceased out of Palestine during our Lord's ministry; only three instances (as already remarked) are recorded of His bringing back the dead to life; and with various forms of human suffering—with poverty and destitution, for example—we do not find that Christ interfered at all.

Now, taking this imaginative (must we call it?) representation of God's care for the material welfare of individuals, and comparing it with those events in our familiar experience which we are accustomed (rightly or wrongly) to attribute to God's temporal providence, it will at once be apparent that between the two there is a remarkable degree of correspon-

dence. Whatever adaptation there may be in certain casual occurrences to our special wants and circumstances at the moment, no one pretends to have ever discovered any violation of the order of nature, either in these occurrences themselves or in their causes. Everything that we call providential, comes about simply in the common course of things. And all such events may also with truth be described as occasional only, as exceptional, and as subject to great limitation. In the ordinary current of our life, we see only the general laws of things tending irreversibly toward their proper and direct effects—no matter what calamity they may inflict upon individuals. Pain, sorrow, and many varied forms of suffering, in fact, make up the lot most familiar to us all. And all that can be said on the other side is, that now and then, when dark clouds are gathering around us, and seem just ready to overwhelm us with misery or ruin or death, some happy conjuncture of circumstances disperses the clouds, and wards off the danger that seemed to threaten. Such deliverances we call, in the common language of this world, “happy accidents,” “good luck,” “fair chances,” “pieces of great good fortune,” and the like; thus clearly recognising something distinctive in events of this kind, even when we do not attribute them to a Divine source, or think of them as having any religious bearing or aspect.

But though we speak of these events as being exceptional in their character, let it be carefully observed that they are not mere random and isolated occurrences. Were this so, it would be impossible to regard them otherwise than as strange accidents for which it was impossible to account. But they are something different from this; and one or two particular instances will perhaps best explain what is peculiar and distinctive in them. Such a case as this, for example, will happen:—

We are young, and about to set out in life. Full of vague wishes, vague ambitions, and with little knowledge of ourselves or of the world about us, we resolve upon some particular course as that in which we are to find prosperity and happiness. But obstacles present themselves, and we are hindered from following it. Again and again we seem just on the point of having our wishes fulfilled, and the way cleared to our entering on our wished-for career. But at the last moment a new difficulty occurs, and our plans are disconcerted. And then at length, greatly against our will, we are driven by overruling circumstances into a sphere of activity we had never previously thought of or sought for. We are crushed and grieved, disappointed and angry, it may be, at our misfortune, as we regard it. But time passes on; we come to prove our own strength and weakness a little better than at first; we get

to understand our own nature more perfectly ; and then we see that the course which we would have taken was one for which we were wholly disqualified, while that into which circumstances drove us was exactly adapted to our peculiar powers and turn of character,—was, in fact, the only one in which we could either have achieved success or attained any moderate proportion of comfort or happiness.

Again, some terrible calamity is impending over us—worldly ruin—the death of our dearest friend—of a beloved husband or wife—a darling child—an only son. We are appalled at the doom which threatens us ; we feel that it will crush us to the earth ; it seems to us that we cannot survive it, at least that life will lose all its zest if it falls upon us ; and we besiege Heaven with our cries for deliverance from it. Our whole souls are thrown into the act of entreaty. And at length our prayers seem to be heard ; the danger, the terror passes away, and we are restored to life and hope and happiness again.

Incidents of this striking character are not perhaps of frequent occurrence. Yet few of us, we imagine, have not experienced something like them at one time or other of our lives. But there are others more common and familiar. Any one who looks back on his past life must recognise how much there was in it exercising the deepest influence

upon its character, which the man himself had no hand in bringing about,—difficulties got rid of in some unexpected way, which he could not himself have overcome; perplexities and dangers evaded by some sudden and unforeseen turn of events, out of which he could not, by any effort of his own, have extricated himself; pressing necessities supplied in some unlooked-for manner, just at the time of sorest need; friends rising up to him in the hour of his saddest and deepest loneliness, in the most casual way, who have proved the directors of his steps, the enlighteners of his mind, the cheerers, the consolers, the support of his heart during the whole of his after-existence. And the result of all has been that an order and unity, a harmony and completeness, have been given to his life, which it could not otherwise have had, and a purpose has been imparted to it which would else have been entirely wanting. Thus each one of us, in the narrow sphere of his own individual history, in the arrangement of those circumstances of his life over which he himself has no control, and their wise inter-adaptation to the peculiarities of his character, is able to discern a distinct object, a well-organized plan, regularly and uniformly carried out through a long course of years, toward some perfected consummation. And in this way we have the marks of intelligent power and benevolent design not less

distinctly manifested to us than in the vaster and grander operations of nature.

So clearly have we often seemed to see the traces of providential care in what befalls us, that at length we begin, when in difficulties and troubles, to look for interpositions of Providence in our behalf. We even acquire the habit of praying to God to help us in our misery or perplexity. But, as I have already hinted, confidence of this kind is apt to meet with many rude checks. Dangers and distresses not merely threaten, but actually come upon us and overwhelm us like a flood ; all our trust and all our prayers for deliverance have no effect in either averting or removing the calamity. In these circumstances, what are we to do ? Our confidence in God having turned out to be unwarranted, must we give up the belief in a Providence altogether, and fall back upon the theory of mere chance sometimes bringing us great good, sometimes intolerable evil ? Perhaps it occurs to us that evil may be providential as well as good, may be sent for our spiritual benefit, to wean us from temporal and material things, and to induce us to seek rather purity and elevation of soul. Perhaps it may even be that the principle upon which Providence acts is never that of sending either material good or material evil directly for their own sake, but that the object always and exclusively in view is through them to teach spiritual elevation. But at

this stage of our inquiry, we are hardly prepared to receive such suggestions. As a matter of fact, it may be that our souls are not purified or elevated by the evils that have befallen us; we are simply disappointed and borne down with utter misery. We looked for material good, our hearts were wholly set upon it, and when it was denied us our spirits had no room for anything but vexation and anger and bitter complaint.

In this way our faith in God is not merely shaken, but brought to a dead lock. We find that we can have no true understanding of Him, no true access to Him, by such manifestations of Himself as He gives through His dealings with us in temporal things. Even if we attain to some belief in His providential care over us, still He and we are ever at cross purposes as to the effect of that care. The good He brings us is not the good we wish to have; our tastes and desires are different from His. We do not appreciate His gifts, nor thank Him for them. There is, in fact, no community of feeling between us, and no common ground on which we can meet. And at length it becomes apparent that the only way in which the barrier between us can be removed is either by His changing His mode of dealing with us, or by our changing our mode of feeling in regard to these dealings. But the former is of course out of the question. And the latter might almost seem to

be out of the question too, for it involves a complete change in our nature, the eradication of our clinging desires after the things of earth and sense, and the formation within us of a prevailing taste for what is true and noble and pure and holy.

II. Thus disappointed in our attempts to obtain any clear, at least any full ground of confidence in the Divine care or love for us, any adequate access to or sympathy with God, through that portion of the evangelic exhibition of Him contained in Christ's miracles of healing, let us now turn to the other side of the Gospel delineation, and see if any better success shall attend our practical trial and testing of it.

This, as already stated, is to be found in the character of Jesus Christ himself. It may be said, no doubt, that Christ's character simply represents the perfection or highest ideal of human nature. But from the evangelic point of view that perfection can only be attained by the operation of the Divine Spirit upon the human; Christ's perfect goodness consists in this, that His spirit is in entire union and harmony with the Spirit of God; and we see in Him, therefore, what absolute loveliness of character is capable of being produced in man by Divine assistance and guidance. Thus Christ in His spirit and life is a true manifestation of God. And in Him we have set before us as an asserted fact, that God not merely so

orders the course of nature as to bring material well-being home to each man individually, but that He also so influences the individual soul as to free it from sin and make it perfect in righteousness.

In thus interpreting the representation of the evangelists, it will be seen that I take the details of their delineation of Christ in the plainest and least disputable sense. I am not called on to discuss the precise nature of that relation between the Divine and human which constituted Christ's personality. It is enough for me to have it admitted that both Deity and Humanity are represented as acting together in Him ; and that all which was peculiar in His character, all that was best and greatest in Him, was the result of the power of the Divine over the human. The unearthly purity and goodness of Christ, then, were as truly a manifestation of God, as the supernatural power which He displayed in His miracles. This, as I take it, was the conception of the evangelists.

It will be necessary, however, to go a little more closely into this point. Every one, of course, notes within his mind two diverging classes of tendency—the one derived chiefly from our sensuous being, from the needs or solicitations of this present life, from the exigencies of occasional and passing circumstances ; the other proceeding from what appears to be some deeper part of our nature—from wants not

connected with present or temporary commodity or interest, but wrapt up as it were in the entireness of our being, and the satisfying of which suffices to the inmost soul throughout all time and under all changes of circumstance. For example, it is pleasant to gratify the senses to their full bent; it often serves some interest of the moment to tell a lie, or to practise deception in some other form; it may be convenient for us to take what belongs to some one else; and it is pleasant to give ourselves entirely up to the world, to taste all its delights, to yield to all its allurements, to feed to the full our vanity, our pride, our ambition, our anger and revenge, our selfishness and cruelty and heartlessness. But the delight and advantage of all these are merely for a time, and not only does the gratification which we derive from them wear away, but shame and remorse, often of the sharpest kind, are apt to follow upon them as their necessary consequences. They satisfy but a part of the mind; the soul in its fulness and integrity revolts and recoils from them, and from itself in cowardly giving way to them even at the very time when it does so.

On the other hand, we seem to feel that to resist all such impulses, to sacrifice all such self-indulgence, wherever these interfere with our being good and kind to others, just and true and brave, pure and temperate, modest and humble, would satisfy

our highest reason, occasion no self-reproaches, but keep the mind serenely complacent, even when every temporal interest, every present advantage, was thrown to the winds, and only the innate nobleness of the soul had free vent, and its highest instincts were obeyed.

None of us, however, is free from worldliness or passion—from moral weakness in some form or other. Some men, without being altogether bad, practise no self-restraint, but give way to every temptation that comes to them; none set themselves determinedly to follow always the right way; and many, by gradual downward courses, sink at length into every conceivable meanness and sin and crime, becoming utterly depraved in their moral nature, and having scarcely any redeeming points of character left at all.

But Christ was the entire opposite of all this. Being a man, we may assume that sense was as pleasing to Him as to other men, passion as seducing, temporal ease and self-indulgence as desirable, and that worldly tendencies and temptations awoke in His mind, and offered their alluring solicitations to Him as they do to all. But the higher and purer instincts of His soul were ever too strong for them, and always prevailed over them. Nor did His character, as may happen with men of weak passions, rest in mere virtuous negatives. Not only did He never do evil, but He was always doing good, and teaching

others to do and to be good. Other men's conduct may generally be seen to proceed from some lurking centre of self; their benevolence is self-display, their wisdom is the love of fame or power, their courage reckless daring or wild passionate hate, their firmness of principle mere narrowness of soul. But everything of this kind is incompatible with what we are told of Christ. Possessed of all power over nature, He might easily have become the conqueror and potentate of all the world, and have surrounded Himself with more than all the magnificence of Eastern monarchs. But He was content to array Himself only in His simple humanity, arrogated no worldly distinctions whatever, consorted with other men on the lowly footing of their common manhood, and so bent all His thoughts, so concentrated all His efforts, on relieving the wants and mitigating the sorrows and pains of others, that His own comfort and wellbeing became things of no account in His mind. In this spirit He calmly encountered weariness, hunger, pain, insult, calumny, and death, leaving everything that regarded Himself to be disposed of by the mere award of Providence, without any attempt on His own part to avert or control what might happen to Him. And with all this self-sacrifice there was no recoil in His character like that which we see in the ordinary forms of stoicism or asceticism, no compensating harshness or hardness.

He was the greatest of philanthropists, but He had none of the narrowness, exclusiveness, or one-sidedness of common philanthropy. His love for humanity was, in fact, simply the love of each individual of the human race, not that diffused sentiment which, entering little into the special characteristics of individual men, is so often destitute of real charity ; for He was as tender, affectionate, and delicate in His friendships as if His heart had never strayed beyond the circle of private life. One sees something of the same mode of looking at mankind in most of the highest and finest spirits of the race,—in Burns, for example, in Shakespeare, in Socrates. He was full of humanity, and had the truest social spirit. In order to gain access to Him, it was no way necessary that you should belong to His set, that you should agree with Him in all things, or that your tastes and modes of thinking should all be like His. It was sufficient that you were a man—one of the race. That was bond enough, interest enough, to draw Him towards you. And if you were only not hard, or selfish, or dishonest, or hypocritical, or given over to conventionalism, but candid, simple, truth-loving, and having some aspirations after what is right, you were sure to awaken His warm regard and to secure His best services. One sees the opposite of this disposition in the coarse, hard, matter-of-fact judgments of those who have “seen life,” and think

that they "know the world." Christ's feeling consisted very much in a love of man simply as man; recognising in him not so much what he is, as, with a subtler discernment, what he might be; taking him always at his best, at what he is capable of becoming, not at what he has merely attained; ever keeping His eye fixed upon the nobleness and perfection of which he still retains the elements, of which he still shows the possibility.

Under this view of Christ we seem to understand the nature of His gentle condescension, of His love of children, of His power in drawing deep and earnest devotion from the other sex, and how His grave yet frank and easy accessibility, His ready sympathy, His confiding trustfulness, His humbleness, His gentleness and compassionateness, so invited and secured not only the affection, the confidence, and the fidelity of those who came under His influence, but created in them an abiding love and adoration of His memory which nothing could ever destroy. In thinking of Him after He had passed away from among them, they felt that He was not merely the best and greatest of all who had ever worn the garb of humanity, but that He had filled to the full every conception that could be formed of what was greatest and best in human-kind.

Even if we should seem to see some want of completeness in His character, some deficiency in ele-

ments of mind that we more especially admire,—such as a want of daring and impulsive courage; the absence of some of the lighter graces of sociality; a kind of poorness of spirit, it may be; a too uniform seriousness and sad-heartedness; and, perhaps, also a want of fitting enjoyment of the innocent pleasures of the present life;—it is possible to conceive that these defects may be either owing to the unskilful omission of them by those who have delineated His character, and we may then fill them in by our own imagination; or it may be that we ourselves have simply overlooked them, and that a more minute study of the evangelic narrative might reveal to us those traces of them which have previously escaped our notice. I do not think, for example, that a certain fiery impulsive bravery can well be denied to Him who made that irruption upon the coarse, brutal, heavy-handed market-folk and stall-keepers of the Temple, or who was accustomed to launch forth those indignant exposures and denunciations of the hypocrisy and wickedness of the cruel and bloody-minded Jewish Pharisees and rulers. Perhaps, too, something of bright smiling repartee may be discernible in the reply to His mother when she found Him in the Temple,—equivalent to, “Why didn’t you look for me in the most natural place of all—in my Father’s house?”¹

¹ Some commentators have interpreted Christ’s reply to His mother in this way.

I think it very likely that a closer scrutiny of the details of Christ's life than we are accustomed to give, might sometimes bring out beautiful traits of character which have hitherto been apt to escape us. I have often thought, for example, what delicacy of nature is revealed in Him by a little incident which occurred on one of the last days of that sad sojourn, between Jerusalem and Bethany, which was terminated by His death. Coming over the hill one morning from Bethany, His mind, I conceive, became sorely oppressed by the thought of the obstinate blindness His countrymen had shown to the sublime faith He had tried to teach them. He had dark forebodings too of His own cruel fate being just at hand, and further on His prophetic eye could perhaps discern the terrible retribution that was to fall upon its authors. But His heart was too full to utter in direct terms what He felt. And so, turning aside to a fig-tree near by, He seemed to seek, probably with abstracted look, for one or two figs to appease His hunger. But finding none, He at once came away, and then with His eye fixed, as I suppose, no longer on the fig-tree, but on the "bloody city," one can conceive the low mournful tones in which the sad symbolical words dropped from His lips,—*"No fruit grow on thee henceforward for ever."*

But, with all its drawbacks, whatever these may be, the Gospel narrative unquestionably sets before

us, with more or less vividness, the idea of one in whom the discordant and contradictory elements of human nature are harmonized and reconciled, the result being a character of the most captivating goodness and beauty,—one in which humanity may be said to have reached the highest conceivable point of excellence and perfection.

Now, it will not be denied that such a delineation is calculated to take strong hold on the minds of those who study it. Just as most of us have in youth been captivated by Lord Byron's Childe Harold, or by Homer's Achilles or Hector, and as at all times of life we are charmed by

"The lovely lady married to the Moor,
And heavenly Una with her milk-white lamb,"

so the character of Christ, as exhibited in the Gospels, is calculated to fill us with the most fervid emotions of admiration and love. Nor is it at all matter of speculation that the Gospels should produce such an impression on those who read them, for it may be asserted, as a plain matter of fact, that, without any consideration of their historical truth or falsehood, the life and death of Christ Jesus have in all ages powerfully affected the hearts of men. And still further, it must be admitted, I think, that such an influence upon the feelings as is here supposed, by a work of mere imagination, is sufficient to account for great practical effects, in correspondence

with those feelings, being produced upon men's life and conduct. The greatest teachers, those who have exercised the mightiest sway over men's minds, have ever been the poets, and there is every reason to believe that the creatures of imagination often sink deeper into the souls of men than the most illustrious characters of history. Even therefore, if the Gospels are to be taken as purely fictitious, this can be no impediment in the way of Christ's character making the strongest possible impression upon our minds, and exciting in us the desire to be like Him. And it is calculated, if I mistake not, to attract us much more powerfully, and to sustain in us a far more permanent enthusiasm than the ordinary delineations of poetical or romantic imagination are accustomed to do, on this ground, that it addresses much deeper instincts in our nature. It is the result of a profounder penetration into the full scope and end of humanity—its worth and capacity; and, by consequence, it involves a juster conception of its true perfection. Once fully entered into and sympathized with, our thoughts can never afterwards get rid of it, and the longings after goodness and purity which it calls up within us can never more be stayed.

The peculiarity of the evangelic ideal seems to be something of this kind—that while other imaginative characters depend for their power of drawing forth our sympathy and admiration, upon some quality or

combination of qualities which subserve the ends of this present life, the Gospel conception of highest excellence is based upon a true adjustment and harmony of the whole innate nature of man, and the ends subserved by it are purely spiritual. There is therefore no form of mind to which it is not fitted to come home with power. Other ideals have been founded upon the deification even of vices—of pride or ambition, or bold defiance of everything high or holy—upon the love of acquisition in some form or other, totally dis severed from moral considerations—or, it may be, upon some poorness or narrowness of mind, which sacrificed everything to its own exceeding narrowness and poorness. And it is curiously illustrative of the false principle on which characters of ideal excellence are usually framed, that whenever the heroes of imagination are of a better cast, and are represented as possessing really high and noble qualities, and as through their nobleness enduring trials and struggling with difficulties, it is commonly thought necessary by the novelist or romancist that these should be followed up by some worldly compensation, some crowning earthly success or glory, in order, as it were, to certify and guarantee to us that the spiritual greatness or worthiness manifested, really was great and worthy.

But the evangelic ideal is entirely the opposite of all this. In it no attempt is made to show special

virtues in an exaggerated form. Its main characteristic is, that it discloses a heroic quality in the lowest spheres of duty, shows a noble principle of life applicable to all conduct whatsoever, and, above all, that that principle ignores every material interest or advantage. It passes by earthly things as of no moment, and the expediency which it recognises is something quite apart from this world. Christ had none of what we are apt to regard as the necessary outward indications of mental or spiritual greatness. He was born into the world under conditions of abject poverty; the general surroundings of His life were mean and sordid,¹ and it was never an object with Him to rise above them. He seemed to have no sense of independence, as we call it, nothing of the "proper spirit" of a man; made no sort of provision for His own livelihood, but led a kind of vagabond life, content to subsist upon the chance charity of others; affected none of the elegancies or refinements of life; counted riches and honours and power and splendour as things of no account; went about doing not great things but good things; paid no court to the rich or the noble,—was quite indifferent to the

¹ These expressions do not refer to the actual circumstances of His parents, which were probably those of tolerable comfort, though not of affluence. But if they were so, it is all the more remarkable that there should have been, as it were, an express renouncement of them, both at His birth and during the whole course of His public ministry.

sort of influence which they exercise in human affairs, sought no association with them, but chose His companions and friends from among those who were as poor and humble as Himself—men of no learning, or wisdom, or talent. He stood always, as I have already said, on His naked humanity—was simply a “son of man,” with no adjuncts, nothing to give emphasis to that character. His whole career, in short, represents to us this fact, that the life of the soul in this world is of necessity one of self-abnegation. Self, as far as this life is concerned, must be abrogated, abjured; and the life to be lived is for others, not for ourselves; for the future, not for the present; for the unseen, not for the temporal or sensible; for the spiritual, the divine, not for the material, the earthly. And such a life must be lived sweetly, naturally, from the heart, not grudgingly and because it is incumbent upon us, and therefore with a supervening hardness and discontent¹ distilling into the character, and slowly infusing rottenness and disintegration into it.

Very curious it is to mark some of the subtle

¹ It is very characteristic of the simple, uncomplaining, probably unconscious self-abnegation of Christ, that the only instance in which we hear of His remarking on the forlornness and discomfort of His life, was when His attention was incidentally drawn to the subject by the thought of what His condition would be to another, not by any immediate feeling of what it was to Himself.—Matt. viii. 20.

indications of the absence of self-seeking in Christ's life. I have already noticed, in referring to the remarkable coincidence between the character of His miracles and that of the ordinary operations of nature, how little self-protrusion there is, how the mighty worker keeps Himself always so much in the background; so latent, so reticent about Himself, that we hardly think of Him as the cause of what we see produced at all. But the same thing appears, and even perhaps more strongly, in His teaching. Here, if anywhere, we might have expected self-display,—an eye to honour and fame and high influence. But notice: there is no commanding eloquence in His words, no acute argumentation, no display of philosophic depth or penetration. A simple, childish parable is told by Him, and allowed to convey its own moral; or a maxim is submitted to our appreciation, and left of itself to find a way to the understanding and heart. So quiet, so unobtrusive, so unapparent is the process by which His teaching takes effect, that though we find ourselves taught and edified, we scarcely think of Him as our teacher at all; we do not, except upon after-reflection, become aware of having been taught by any one. His words come upon us like a sweet breeze that makes glad a bank of violets, and itself passes by heedless and unheeded. And, apart from this, it seems almost by accident that His discourses have been preserved to us at all.

He at least took no heed about their being sent down to after times, thus showing that charming unconsciousness in His goodness which looked no further than its immediate aim, that all-absorption in its present object which left everything else out of account. In fact, we almost feel disposed to blame the strange heedlessness which thought so little of posterity as to provide nothing for its advantage; but how sure a test does it afford us of the total want of ulterior object of any kind in the copious outflow of Christ's goodness and wisdom.

And then, again, let it be noted as another mark of the worldly unattractiveness given by the evangelists to Christ's life, that He met with no success even of the kind He aimed at. Very few they were who cared for His teaching. And in every other point of view His life was a total failure. His career resulted in nothing but misery, ruin, and violent death, not only to Himself but to almost all who connected themselves with Him. There was no worldly compensation whatever for all the suffering which it brought Him. The acts themselves which occasioned His sufferings were His only compensation,—a compensation consisting in this, that it was His meat and His drink to do the will of His Father. We may say, indeed, thinking of His resurrection, that His godlike life rendered Him instinct with immortality, and made it impossible for death to have power over Him ;

and that this was the compensation to which He looked forward. But mark, it was not the life of this world to which He rose again, not the life of sense, of earthly enjoyment, but a purely spiritual existence, in which His happiness was simply conformed to that which He had already possessed in the midst of His sufferings, and had derived from His overcoming the world and treading it under foot.

I have previously spoken of the beauty and attractiveness of Christ's life, and of the strong admiration which it is calculated to excite in our minds; and all that I have said I think is perfectly true. At the same time it must be admitted that this sort of impression is made upon us only in so far as we allow the better part of our nature to have way. It delights and excites the imagination, but the imagination only; and the moment we attempt to bring it more closely home to ourselves, instead of pleasing, it produces something of a repelling effect upon us. We cannot sympathize with it in those heights of spirituality to which we at length see it rising. Its beauty, unearthly as it is, is not such as we should desire. And if we attempted of our own motion to conceive a perfect character, it is likely that we should make it in most respects the very reverse of what Christ is represented to be. But, repelling or not, still the impression which it makes will not away

from our minds ; and even when most distasteful to us, we cannot help recognising it as representing the only true and just development of humanity—as that high and perfect ideal which man was intended to reach, and *would* reach, if only his best tendencies had free course. And even when we feel it to be unattainable by us, and have no true desire to attain it, our reason is persuaded that we ought to attain it, and that it is worth attaining. In the very midst of our indifference and dislike to it, we wish that we could be of a better mind.

But here lies the difficulty. Self, the world, the flesh cannot be overcome and given up by any power inherent in man ; the utmost force of the human will cannot attain it. And the only means by which the end can be accomplished (if it is ever to be accomplished at all) is by some new power being infused into the soul by Him who originally created it. This I understand to be what is intimated to us by the evangelic representation of Christ. His ineffable goodness was entirely due to the constant influence and co-operation of the Deity with His human spirit. And if we would attain to be in any degree like Him, it must be by the assistance of the same sustaining and strengthening power.

The questions, then, which immediately arise are, What does experience show upon this point ? Can we obtain this assistance ? And, by doing so, can

we become in any degree like Christ? These inquiries I must now proceed, if possible, to answer.

Man is not all sense and passion. Seductive as he feels the world to be, he knows that his continuance in it is of very short duration. He is more or less aware of the unsatisfyingness of earthly ends and enjoyments. Doubts and fears incident to his condition—pain, sickness, sorrow, remorse, and the approach of death—weigh upon and subdue his spirit. Aspirations, faculties, instincts within him, point to the probability of a future existence, different from, and higher in kind than, that which he lives upon earth. And he feels that if our present life be only the entrance into and preparation for another, it must follow that all that part of our being which relates only to this world is of very secondary account. Reasonings and experiences such as these prepare him to be, not merely imaginatively but practically, interested in and attracted towards a character like that of Christ. He sees in it the contradictions of his own spiritual nature reconciled and overcome; the higher elements of that nature holding their true place in the control and regulation of the desires and conduct. He recognises in it humanity developed according to the true principles of its growth. He awakens to a sense of its beauty and nobleness. He admires and loves it, and his love begets a longing to be like it. But on making his first faint effort at the

imitation of Christ, to do as He did and to be conformed to Him in spirit, he is surprised to find that what was so attractive in another is not, in practice, pleasant or easy or natural to himself. He discovers that every act of goodness requires some corresponding self-sacrifice, and this he is seldom prepared to make. He soon begins to feel wearied with his efforts; he falters and halts. Dissatisfied and ashamed of his own weakness, however, he by and by resumes the struggle, perhaps with greater determination than before, but with no better result. And at length, after many renewed attempts and many sad failures, he becomes faint-hearted, disgusted, disappointed, and almost despairing. The very effort to be good seems to irritate the propensity to evil, to call up its full force, and to render it more inveterate. He is perplexed, and knows not what to do.

Now, it is true that in every other kind of attempt at self-culture or self-improvement, difficulties apparently similar present themselves. If we attempt to learn a new language or art or branch of science, everything seems strange and hard to us, full of darkness and impossibilities. In this case, however, the way soon clears, and perseverance and determination carry us over every obstacle. But in the pursuit of goodness, in attempts to elevate our own moral character, experience gives a totally different result.

Not only is the success we meet with in no way commensurate to the efforts we make, but it actually appears as if, in endeavouring to become better than we are, we simply rouse the strength of the evil principle within us ; and the effect is that our character deteriorates rather than improves under the process of attempted reformation. This may seem paradoxical. But if we attend carefully to what takes place in our minds whenever we prevail upon ourselves to abstain from the indulgence of some evil propensity which we have previously allowed to have its way, we shall find that our nature immediately revenges itself upon us by lapsing into some degree of stolidity or moroseness or bitterness of temper. If we perform some acts of goodness because our conscience approves though our inclination recoils, it becomes speedily apparent, too, that our minds are losing their truthfulness and unity ; that the soul is utterly unchanged, whatever the outward acts may be ; and that our inward feelings and our outward life and conduct are at variance with each other, and the result is a course of self-deception and hypocrisy. At length we can endure the restraint and contradiction put upon ourselves no longer ; we become ashamed and disgusted at the pretence of goodness which we have set up, and in a burst of recklessness we not only return to our former sins, but (as often happens) we plunge into

others of a darker hue, thus realizing the truth of our Lord's parable, that the ejection of one devil is only preparing the way for the ingress of seven others worse than the first. Nor can it well be otherwise. For are not a man's life and conduct the inevitable result of his natural taste and character? while the laws of Christian morality take no account whatever of these, but lay down the same rule for all, inso-much that one becoming a Christian is absolutely required to leave his own character quite out of account, and to suppress with the strong hand his most eager desires and most violent passions. On the very face of it such a thing is impossible, and from our present point of view the demands of Christianity may justly be pronounced a manifest absurdity.

But though nothing can be accomplished towards the formation of Christian character by sheer force of determination, roused into impulsive action by the attractive force of goodness when contemplated from without, is it not possible gradually to elevate and purify the spirit by inducing it to dwell in serious reflection on the evil consequences of worldliness and sin, and on the peace and happiness to be attained by a life of unselfish goodness, until it is able absolutely to experience these as realities? I fear it is vain to put such a question. For how can I attain to goodness, which by its very nature is unselfish, by a consideration of the selfish advantages it may bring

me ? Instead of serious reflection having anything to do with goodness, is it not rather the opposite ? Is not true goodness a reckless, inconsiderate thing ? But apart from this, even let a man feel as poignantly as it is possible for his nature to do, the misery and ruin which he is bringing on himself by indulgence in sinful gratifications, it is impossible that the future, the unseen, the impalpable, the purely spiritual, evil, should ever make the same impression on his mind that the present, sensible, all-absorbing, sinful enjoyment does. The very constitution of our nature, so akin to the material and the worldly, forbids it ; and the struggle after the right, therefore, must always be carried on at a terrible disadvantage in our minds. The utmost ever attained is that a man may be induced to keep his passions in check by the strong persuasion that their indulgence will destroy his health, or unfit him for attaining some great worldly object at which he aims, as wealth or station or high reputation. Even this is much to accomplish. But it evidently does not bring him a step nearer to goodness. The reformation accomplished has been merely upon the surface of the character, it has involved no rising above himself ; it began in worldliness and it ended in worldliness, and it was, in fact, only the substitution of one form of selfish indulgence for another. Indeed, we can only conclude that the man was at the last more intensely

selfish and worldly than before, because the deeper selfishness of his nature having been victorious, must henceforth be the leading, pervading characteristic of his mind. And even this power of attaining to mere future worldly good by the sacrifice of present pleasure is a rare one ; and how much more rare to find one willing to give up everything in this life for the sake of the life beyond this world ! And even if such a one could be found, the end would still be naught, for the man would merely have carried the base commercial spirit, the spirit of venture and speculation, into his dealings with eternity.

Another theory may be, that though energy and determination can do so little, though serious reflection on consequences produce worse than no effect, yet the gradual influence of persevering habit may enable us at length to attain to the full height of the Christian character. Trial and experience, however, show the futility of this hope as completely as of the others. What is apt to occasion misapprehension on this point is, perhaps, the circumstance that unquestionably we sometimes appear to see partial changes of character effected by the influence of habit, and it is a natural enough inference, that if a man can overcome one or two bad propensities in himself, he will, by gradual process, succeed at length in conquering every evil inclination, and effect in himself a complete and perfect self-reformation. But

however paradoxical it may seem, the truth which actual experiment brings to light is the very opposite of this, viz., that any small success we obtain in improving our character, so far from paving the way for further change, is calculated rather to retard it. And the explanation is easy,—for every act of virtue or goodness, as I have already remarked, being an act of self-sacrifice, is done uneasily and by a kind of constraint. Though we may consent, therefore, to put fetters upon some of our inclinations, those of them particularly which are most indolent, and therefore less sensible of the curb, the very nature of things makes every additional act of self-restraint more difficult, renders goodness more and more a matter of complication, and brings us ever nearer and nearer to that extreme limit of the power of control over ourselves beyond which nothing but revolt can ensue. Every fresh act of self-restraint becomes, in fact, more difficult than that which preceded it. In efforts at self-reformation, too, we are apt to cherish a lurking expectation of being immediately compensated in some way for the sacrifices we make to duty, and not finding this expectation fulfilled, we at length strike work, partly from weariness, partly from irritation and disappointment at what we regard as the wrong and injustice thus done us, and partly because the limit of our moral strength has been reached, and we can do no more. Life without

the joys of life is not worth having ; and to give up everything for Christianity, as we are told we must do, to count all that is dearest, most pleasant and delicious, nothing but dross and dung that we may win Christ, seems to us a most irrational bargain to make, and is, at all events, utterly beyond our power to fulfil. To do so might be possible were we in a state of absolute apathy, like that of the dead clods or stones of the valley, or, on the other hand, could we raise ourselves to the purity of disembodied spirits, but not while we continue living material beings, full of the love of this worldly material life, full of the sense of its enjoyments, and of its all-conquering desires and passions.

But one other mode of attaining our end seems yet open to us. Could we not possess ourselves with such a clear knowledge of God's goodness and love, that gratitude and admiration might constrain our minds into entire conformity with His, and thus induce us to give ourselves heartily up to His service, —might raise us above ourselves, and make goodness easy and pleasant, and any sacrifice in achieving it appear small and of no consideration ? But here, too, when we make the trial, our preconceived notions and expectations are compelled to give way. For consider the circumstances under which we are supposed to make the attempt of penetrating more deeply into God's character. Even when our minds

are perfectly calm and indifferent, it is impossible to shut our eyes to the fact that on such a question we have much conflicting evidence to deal with, and our decision might be vacillating and doubtful. But I am now assuming the inquiry to be undertaken at a time when the whole desires of the soul are directed towards its emancipation from the torment of sin. And at such a time, of what avail can it be to discover (which is all that we shall be able to do) that God has made considerable provision for the well-being of our lower nature, has furnished us with some means of happiness in this earthly state of existence, but has left our higher and spiritual nature altogether uncared for? It is evident that no other impression than this can be made upon us at a moment when, struggling after the true and right, we find that we can make no progress towards its attainment. On the one hand, we experience the fact that God has endowed us with the terrible consciousness of sin and with the most exalted ideas of purity and goodness; on the other, that He has utterly deprived us of the power of overcoming evil and of following the way of righteousness and virtue. He has so filled our minds with the idea of holy purity that its possession has become indispensable to our happiness, and then He has ruthlessly denied to us the capacity of realizing it. He permits our sensibilities to good and evil to be quick-

ened to the highest pitch, He has implanted in us the desire to know and love Him, He has raised within us doubts and fears and longings about the future world; but He sends us no means of allaying our apprehensions and satisfying our desires, of clearing up our doubts, of either gratifying or blunting our susceptibilities. We need light, and He sends us nothing but deepest darkness; we need consolation, and He leaves us helpless in our misery; we need strength to serve Him, and He abandons us in our weakness to be preyed upon by every temptation that comes. What other explanation can be given of all this, but that He meant us only for this low present animal life, and that, so far as we are concerned, He cares not for the true, the just, the pure, the holy? How, then, can we conclude Him to be good or kind? Shall we not rather believe Him to be cruel and malignant? How, when He subjects us to such bitter taunting irony, mockery, and delusion, can we love or trust Him any more? Our inevitable conclusion is that He has utterly broken faith with us. The strong consciousness of good and evil which He had implanted in us gives us the right to expect that we should be able to attain to righteousness, but when we believed ourselves just on the point of grasping it and making it our own, we found that instead of this we had been simply lured to the brink of a precipice, with

no other resource but to fling ourselves over it. God's alleged goodness and love, therefore, seem to have been brought fairly and closely to the test, and to have conclusively failed to abide it.

Perhaps in these remarks on the insufficiency of humanity to change its own nature, I have used too much the language of logic and disputation, and have spoken as if the whole matter were a question of speculative opinion. This, however, is by no means the impression which I wish to convey. I mean to assert it as a simple matter of *fact* that our nature has no innate power to rise to the height of its own ideas of human perfection, *i.e.*, to overcome itself and to attain to the lofty requirements of Christianity: and I appeal to universal experience and observation as my indisputable guarantee. I am not, therefore, attempting to set forth a debatable theory or doctrine of Christian theology but a well-ascertained fact of human nature, a truth recognised by the general sentiment of mankind at large, and which even those who are no way favourably disposed to the scheme of Christianity are accustomed to maintain as strongly as others. In asserting what I have done, I neither assume the innate depravity of human nature, nor do I recognise any special opinions as to the freedom or necessity of the human will. All that is implied in what I have maintained is, that individual character is

something fixed and determinate—it may be altogether bad, or it may be in the main good (perhaps even possessing some features of consummate beauty and excellence), but not in any case reaching to the full perfection of Christianity. And what I assert as the result of experience and observation is, that this last can never be attained by any human effort. Some passion, some worldliness, some frailty, and in even the goodness arrived at, some lurking motive of self-gratification to taint or neutralize the goodness, always operate as a drag upon the better inclinations, the nobler aspirations of the heart. In a word, to use an illustration of Bacon's, "as water will not ascend higher than the level of the first spring-head from whence it descendeth," so the best efforts of the will can never rise above the inevitable base points of the nature and character. If this is objected to, I simply ask the objector to make full trial and experiment of his own power in the matter before he finally determines that my conclusion is in error. I repeat what I said at the commencement of this paper, that the sort of conviction which I seek for in the minds of my readers, as that alone which can be of any avail in the formation of the religious spirit, is neither the insecure persuasion of heated fancy and eager excitement, which poetry or rhetoric may at any time create, nor that sense of logical concatenation which the reasoning

power acting by itself alone, without due reference to observed facts, can so easily produce, but that full, close, intimate knowledge which follows upon long-continued practice and every conceivable form of effort and trial, like the familiar conversance of an artisan or professional person with the subjects of his most habitual occupation.

In another respect I have, perhaps, given an inadequate representation of what takes place in the mind when it begins to aspire and try after excellence and perfection. I have said nothing of the terrible struggle and intense agony of the soul when the principles of good and evil within us come thus into full collision. Scarcely any language, however, can express how fearful that struggle is; and nothing can less enable us to conceive its nature than to imagine it as a mere contention of logic—an affair of the reasoning or speculative faculty alone. Let it be considered that of all things in the world evil and good are the most opposite to each other; and when both are conjoined in the same spirit, both striving for mastery in the guidance of the will and conduct, it may well be believed that the effects of the deadly enmity between them can be of no ordinary kind. On the one hand, there is the ever quickening sense of right, the ever deepening desire of emancipation from evil; on the other, the slow-growing and frightful apprehension that we

are bound inextricably in the fetters of sin; and, finally, the consummated conviction that it is even so. There is the shame and the remorse of sin, the shrinking from it as hateful, abominable, contemptible, and along with this, the hideous touch of the dread necessity which compels us to consort with it continually and for ever. There is the consciousness that its poison is working utter destruction in our nature, is subverting all its nobleness, and overwhelming us with degradation and ruin; the feeling that life with it must become ever more and more intolerable, that peace or happiness can never reach us while it is undestroyed; and, alongside of all this, the feeling of utter powerlessness to emancipate ourselves from it, the ever increasing consciousness that it is the most vital part of our nature, that no principle within us can extrude it from our constitution or avail to crush and destroy it. We are in the position of a man dying of hunger and thirst, and yet unable to put forth his hand to raise the bread and water, that seem to lie close within his reach, to his lips. The shame, the pain, and the misery of sin continue to mount ever higher and higher, and the sense of incapacity to destroy it becomes ever clearer and stronger, till at length the feeling of our own weakness and meanness and utter moral helplessness presses upon us to such a degree as to make our humiliation and

loathing of ourselves, our consciousness of degradation, all but intolerable. That which has become all-essential to us is found to be impossible of attainment; the very root and mainspring of our happiness is struck at with deadly effect, and life henceforth is felt to be not worth having. "All is lost," we exclaim, "if we cannot escape from the vile pollution and debasement of sin;" and forthwith the motives to suicide present themselves with an urgency and reasonableness which it seems impossible to resist. Life being vain and purposeless, and inseparable from utter torment, what remains for us but to leave it? Well might Dante exclaim in regard to this fearful crisis of his life (for it is to this very struggle that in the opening of his great poem he doubtless refers)—

"Tanto è amara, che poco è più morte."

I hope the reader will not charge me with drawing a fanciful or exaggerated picture. I certainly do not intend to do so. I repeat that I simply aim at giving a plain matter-of-fact detail of what I believe to be a very common experience—an experience which few men, possessing much strength of character, combined with moral sensibility and religious reflectiveness, fail to encounter, and which they never cease to look back upon as the most critical and terrible passage of their lives.

But alongside of, and arising out of, these hopeless, successless efforts after goodness, another kind of striving towards the same end has been going on within us. In proportion as our moral weakness has become more and more apparent, the question has ever and anon presented itself to us, Will God Himself not interfere to help us? May He who formed our nature not be induced so to change it as to make goodness, instead of a painful effort incapable of being sustained by us, simple, easy, and natural? How then is this to be ascertained? How is trial to be made in order to determine the point, yea or nay? Evidently by some other way than by direct striving; not by action at all, but apparently by some sort of "wise passiveness." Common observation falls in with this; for how often are we told that temptation is best met not by fighting against it, but by fleeing from it? This, however, does not go very far or very deep, for (1.) merely to escape temptation is not to be actively or positively good; and (2.) even to flee is not always in accord with the will. But in the discourses attributed to Christ, a suggestion is offered that may perhaps prove of more worth: "Whosoever asketh receiveth, and he that seeketh findeth, and to him that knocketh it shall be opened." At first, indeed, this invitation (when we make trial of accepting it) does not seem to promise very much—indeed, it

almost looks like a mockery; for he that has not already the will to be good, how can he pray for that will? But though we do not directly wish to follow a righteous life, yet the difficulties, perplexities, mischiefs, miseries, and dangers in which we are involved by sin accumulate upon us with ever increasing weight, press upon us with ever increasing force, and overwhelm us at length with weariness and shame, with disgust at ourselves, with fear and terror; and we occasionally wish, if not to become righteous, at least to be delivered from the evils which sin brings upon us. Gradually these evils become more closely associated in our minds with the idea of sin, become more and more inseparable from it. The cause works its effect as it were before our very eyes.

Meanwhile, in our varied perplexities and miseries, we have, it may be, acquired some positive experience of the effect of prayer—*i.e.*, in addition to the mere abstract presumption that the Deity will help His creatures when in their great need they call upon Him for help, we have actually made trial of imploring His assistance, driven to do so by the evils and difficulties that beset us, and have seen what followed upon our doing so. Such a thing as this, for example, has happened to us :—

We are assailed by strong temptation. The evil and miserv of yielding to it present themselves to

our minds in the most powerful light; but to give way is full of present delight, and it seems to us impossible to maintain an effective resistance. A painful conflict of weak vacillation ensues; good and evil seem to be fighting over our prostrate wills for the possession of our souls; one moment we incline to one side, another to another; and at last the point of yielding seems just arrived at, we think we must give it up, when the mind rouses itself to make one more hopeless, desperate effort of supplication for deliverance, and then perhaps the passion calms down, the temptation fades away we know not how, only, as it seems to us, by no power or further effort of our own.¹

¹ The following singular relation, extracted from a private letter, describes an experience somewhat akin to the above, and appears to me, at the same time, to indicate with a strange vividness the closeness of intercourse which may sometimes take place between the human soul and God:—"I was sitting working," says the writer, "one evening in the dining-room at —, feeling very much oppressed by an accusing, doubting spirit. I had been seeking and desiring to know God for many years, and it all seemed vain, and the accusation which oppressed me as if some enemy brought it against me was, that I was so essentially a seeker for self in seeking God, that it was impossible I ever should find God's glory, I felt, was not my aim, but only my own good. This ray of knowledge had pierced my soul, that the deep wells of joy for which I was thirsting shrunk aside from godless lips. Therefore I sought God.

"I loathed the weakness and the shame and the stain of sin, and longed for the beauty of holiness—therefore I sought

Now, there may be much or little in such an incident as this; I don't profess to account for it; but it is certain that such events do occasionally occur, and their occurrence imparts some faint hope to the mind that by prayer we may at length be finally delivered from sin. Still, results of this kind are both rare and uncertain; and in very many, indeed far the most cases, such a struggle as that just described ends not in the triumph, but in the overthrow of the good inclination. And whether it terminate in the one way or the other, it effects no change in the character, or what may be called the permanent tendencies of the will. Whenever temptation again arises, the same weak wasting conflict

God. My position seemed very like trying to shuffle out the highest winning card; and such seeking, it was borne in upon me, could never find anything but wrath and anguish. I was sinking into a sort of inane despair, because of that accusing which I could not gainsay, when suddenly my little girl called out from her bed as if she were frightened about something. I ran instantly to see what had happened, and found the child excited at having heard the chirruping of a bird in the room without seeing a bird anywhere. I turned to look for it most unwillingly, for I dislike very much catching a living creature, and the frightened flutter of a bird in my hands is almost intolerable. Suddenly a half-fledged sparrow flew upon me, chirruping loudly. I opened the window, hoping that it would fly out—but no, it would not. Then I walked down-stairs to the garden with the creature still clinging to me, and shook it off upon the flowers. I turned to leave it, for I heard the mother's voice near, but the little thing would not be left. It insisted on being with me, so I took it in and fed it, and

has to be repeated, and the inclination of the mind towards good never seems to grow one whit more stable. The will only becomes more and more divided against itself, and the struggle between good and evil within it more enfeebling, distracting, and inveterate than ever. Still, as I have already said, hope is a little encouraged, and the idea will not away from us, that in accordance with the analogy of God's works, it is inconceivable that we shall be finally left to contend with evil altogether to no

made it a nest under a basket. It would not remain in the nest, but struggled through the holes of the basket and came to me. I was so delighted with it I could think of nothing else, but sat nursing and feeding it all the evening. — laughed and said, 'How absurd you are to care so much for that creature, when it does not care for you at all—only for its own food. It is hungry, so it comes to you.' And I answered, 'Yes, I know that is true. It is hungry, and that is just why I feel so tenderly for the poor helpless thing.' My doubts of the evening were not in my mind when I spoke, but when I went into my room they returned upon me, and I threw myself down in a sort of passion of prayer, and told God that my seeking of Him was selfish entirely; that there was no fineness of devotion, no desire for His glory, about me at all, but just a selfish hunger and a selfish thirst, and a selfish desire for Him, because He was life and beauty. But I said unto Him, 'I who am so selfish—I was touched with inexpressible tenderness and yearning by the seeking of that little hungry bird—and why art Thou not touched by mine?' I got up almost listlessly from reaction of real emotion, and quite mechanically took up the Bible, which fell open at the words, 'Fear not; ye are of more value than many sparrows.'

"Perhaps this lesson impressed me the more from being

purpose. For a while this feeling continues, but not for long. And when we find, after incessant struggle, that no real advance is made, no permanent advantage gained, only an occasional and doubtful deliverance, it seems vain to us to contend further. Utter despair begins to take possession of us, and the terrible crisis already spoken of comes on, in which the soul is fain to seek its own dissolution, and in which suicide or madness appears to be its only outlook. All seems to be lost, and the end come. We have given up the last shred of hope deepened a year after by the birth and death of my precious baby. She had never known anything of me, or desired anything of me except her food, and yet it was like parting with my life to part with her ; and while my grief was still fresh, I received a letter saying, ' Be thankful that the child was taken so soon ; its loss would have been more dreadful if it had learnt to know and love you ;' and in my indignation at that letter, I remembered old George Herbert's lines :—

' From thee all pity flows ;
 Mothers are kind because thou art,
 And dost dispose
 To them a part :
 Their infants them, and they suck thee
 More free.'

And I knew in my heart that I might seek God with self-seeking, because of His love for me. I have learnt much since then, for one thing, not only that God meets self-seeking, but that *only unto Him* should be self-seeking at all. Also I have learnt that the sparrow's seeking realizes only a sparrow's finding, an infant's seeking realizes an infant's finding—and this I have been taught, by having been graciously brought into a higher seeking, or rather into fuller knowledge of the love that seeks me."

and confidence in ourselves. We have tried every resource of our nature by which we might have hoped to become righteous, but have found them all utterly to fail us. We have at length satisfied ourselves by clear and exhaustive experiments that there is no power within us to such an end. Righteousness has become absolutely indispensable to us, but also an utter impossibility. We cannot live without it, and we are incapable of attaining it. Horror, despair, and death stand near,—have even already, as we seem to feel, laid hold upon us. Sin has now plainly manifested itself as the law of our being; and after having proved by our late experience how hard this law is, how unyielding, how inexorable, to think that it should ever be changed seems to us now not impossible merely, but inconceivable. One of the last feelings which presses upon the spirit with especial heaviness is a sort of hopeless groping after God, a desperate, despairing “feeling after Him, if haply we might find Him.” This feeling seems to be excited and encouraged by what seems an instinctive consciousness that if we could only get nearer to Him, so as to see Him plainly manifested before us as loving and caring for us, the effect would be that we would at length attain to righteousness, would catch a portion of His spirit, and be inclined to love and serve Him in return. But it is at once checked and

cruelly destroyed by the agonizing experience that such a thing is the vainest of all vain hopes. The laws of our mental nature rise up against it; we never until now felt that God was so far away from us; we never until now saw so clearly that we shall never know Him, that He will never show Himself to our spirits, never interpose in our behalf. A great wide gulf is fixed between us and Him, and no human power or effort can ever enable us to cross over it. In a word, the two great principles of our spiritual constitution have come into strong collision—the principle by which, in idea, we admire goodness and despise sin, and long to throw it off and rise to righteousness; and the principle by which, in practice, we still inveterately addict ourselves to what is evil. This collision has reached its maximum; the spirit is convulsed to its inmost depths, and its ruin in some form or other apparently imminent, inevitable; when suddenly, quite unexpectedly, and without any appreciable cause, a great change takes place within us. Doubt and difficulty seem to vanish, and the whole horizon of our thoughts is cleared. What we had so long thirsted for seems to have come at last. The will no longer struggles against the conscience, and the practical is now in accord with the speculative or idealizing nature. And this great change, though in its origin thus sudden, instantaneous, and unaccountable, proves in

event to be abiding ; in most cases, if not in all, the will never afterwards widely swerves from its new position ; and in men whose character has before been openly irregular or vicious, the change of which I speak becomes conspicuous to all around them by an absolute and entire alteration of modes of life and conduct.

Of the nature of this change, so quickly effected, so silent, so entirely imperceptible to consciousness except by its results, and so incapable of being accounted for, it is perhaps impossible to give any full and precise description or definition. My impression, however, is that it consists simply in a change of the will or moral aptitudes, not in any new perceptions of the understanding. What was evident to us before is not more evident now, what were probabilities before are mere probabilities still, what was doubtful before is just as doubtful still. No new facts, no new arguments as to the being or character or nature of God have been set before us. If it can even be supposed that we should have doubted of God's existence before this change took place within us, it is not to be imagined that anything has now been disclosed to demonstrate it. If we doubted whether God is good and kind to His creatures—if we doubted whether He loves purity and truth and justice, and desires that mankind should be good and holy, not sensual and wicked,—

nothing has now occurred absolutely to clear away those doubts. We have not now even received the assurance of a future state of existence, nor has it been proved to us by any additional arguments that the wicked will be punished and the righteous rewarded in the next world. In short, no recondite problems of any kind which previously perplexed and troubled us, have now been solved for us. All speculative doubts and difficulties remain exactly where they were. But the difference is that the uneasiness which doubt formerly occasioned to us has now passed away, because perfect certainty in these things has ceased to be of much practical concern to us. Before our change, doubt was painful to us, because without absolute assurance it seemed impossible to find a motive whereby to determine our course of action. But now, our will being in accord with the good and right, certainty is no longer of the same consequence to us ; we now so far love the good and true that we are willing to cast in our lot with them, even although we shall have nothing to gain by doing so,—even although goodness may be on the losing side, and even although the devil and not God shall eventually prove to be the stronger party, and the ultimate ruler and disposer of all things. In short, our will is now so effectually disposed towards the right that we are determined recklessly to abide by it in the face of

all chances ; and by taking part with goodness we feel that we have healed all the divisions and set at rest all the conflicts by which our souls were formerly accustomed to be torn.

I have said that the change in our spirits of which I have spoken is very much a change of will. But it is not to be supposed that the disposition to evil is altogether destroyed within us, nor even that the inclination to goodness is so strong as always to give assurance of victory when a struggle with temptation recurs. The state of the case is rather, I think, this :—The proneness to evil is much what it was before ; and just as before, so far as we trust in our own strength to overcome it, we are certain to fail : but this is counterbalanced by a clearer sense of sin being evil and abominable, by a stronger and more direct aversion to it, by a quicker and juster instinct of our own inability to resist it, and by a readier trustfulness and humility in applying to the Unseen for that help which we need in order to overcome it. The prevailing habit and attitude of the soul is such as to render prayer as easy, natural, and almost necessary an act, as formerly it was the opposite of all this. And thus, the will leaning strongly towards good, and the mind saturated with the experience of its own weakness, and of the power and readiness of Him to whom we pray to help and deliver whenever implored to do so, it can

hardly fail, if my interpretation of our experience has been correct, that deliverance will come whenever prayer is truly made.

Such, so far as I have been able to ascertain the facts of the case, is the characteristic consciousness of a Christian—such the peculiar nature of the struggle which must be gone through in order to become one. The conclusion which I draw from the whole is, that Christianity is simply the disclosure of the great law of our moral and religious life, and that in the struggle I have described that law is realized. The certainty of this conclusion is no way affected by the consideration whether the book in which it was first announced be inspired or uninspired—whether the narrative of Christ's life be historical or mythical—or whether Christ Himself was a real or merely an imaginary personage. In Christ's character we had absolute human perfection depicted as the result of constant sustaining divine influence operating upon His human spirit; and now in our own selves we have some distant approach to that same self-abnegating goodness, produced assuredly by no power or effort of our own,—therefore of necessity by some unseen beneficent power external to ourselves, and which we venture to call God. All this being simply the ascertained result of observation and experiment, can hardly, I think, be gainsaid,—of observation and experiment not merely

once made, and never afterwards repeated, but continued habitually, daily, almost hourly, often through a long course of years. And it is difficult, almost impossible, to suppose any error of consciousness on the point, because of the exceeding sharpness of the contrast between the experience which we have in performing acts of piety or spirituality, and that which we have in the ordinary acts of life. In these last the will takes effect immediately, directly; we no sooner determine to rise up, sit down, walk, run, or strike a blow, than it is done. But if we wish to choose the good and refuse the evil, we are ever holding ourselves in suspense, have a painful sense of incapacity, and are quite unable to advance. In other things a man can acquire skill, confidence, determination, a bold, free, firm hand, a resolute foot,—in religion never. In the ordinary conduct of life, he can not only rely upon his own strength and skill, can not only know beforehand with absolute certainty and perfect exactness what he shall be able to effect, but the very self-reliance which he has constitutes a main ground of his success in performing what he intends; his very confidence of being able to do so-and-so forms no small part of his skill in doing it. But in the religious course it is altogether the reverse. The moment a man begins to think he has attained anything in religion, and feels confidence in himself to do anything, he is on the point

of stumbling. Progress in religion depends not on confidence, but on diffidence: and, as a matter of fact, the most advanced Christian, *i.e.*, the man most skilful in the cultivation of goodness, and in the practice of good deeds, is most distrustful of himself, most ready not to resolve, but to hesitate and look beyond himself for the power to do anything.

Thus, then, it has become plain to us, too, that religion is a possible thing; that the human and the Divine are not, as many have supposed—as even we ourselves seemed, at an earlier stage of our inquiry, almost compelled to believe—separated by an impassable barrier, but that the gulf between them is capable of being bridged over, and the two brought into close relation and sympathy with each other. All other foundations, indeed, on which we tried to build up a clear knowledge of God, and to obtain full access to Him, proved inadequate to these ends. In temporal and material things we generally found that we were able to help ourselves, and the want of God was never fully brought home to us; but as soon as we entered the sphere of the spiritual, we found that we were helplessly dependent; and in this utter dependence we were able for the first time to recognise Him who is “absolutely to be depended on.” At first, of course, when the sense of our spiritual weakness was small, and the desire for spiritual benefits weak and vacillating, the ope-

ration of the Divine within us was irregular and obscure. But as the consciousness of spiritual weakness became more sensitive, and the wish for spiritual strength more powerful and engrossing, God became more and more apparent to us through the ever responsive supply of the needed blessings. And at length the intercourse between the weak human soul, ever needing and ever asking for new strength, and the unseen beneficent power, ever granting what was needed, became like the answering of heart to heart. The most deeply hidden wants, the hardly articulate prayer, the obscure cravings and groanings of our spirit, being constantly replied to by the conferring of blessings of the most subtle and perfect adaptation to its requirements, made God known to us, not as a blind beneficent power, but as a deeply penetrating, sympathizing intelligence, a distinctly cognisable personality, with whom we might (hardly in a figurative sense) talk, confer, hold the closest and most intimate communion, and towards whom the inevitable feelings of our souls were, not as in other and more imperfect forms of religion—awe, wonder, or terror—but sympathy, gratitude, trusting faith, love, longing.

It will perhaps be said that what I have thus established as true omits a good many points of belief which have generally been regarded as the very essentials of Christianity. But this objection

proceeds, I think, in a great measure from the objectors having taken up a somewhat different point of view from that which I have chosen. Many regard Christianity chiefly as a means of saving the soul from hell ; I, as I intimated at the outset, have looked at it as the means of living a holy life. And if my view has comprehended everything which goes to the building up of the Christian character, I think that, as far at least as my present object is concerned, I am quite entitled to leave all else out of account. For he who has attained to being on terms of close communion with God, who feels that God has delivered him from his disposition to sin, and daily helps him in all his trials and temptations, who is conscious also that he himself loves God and truly desires in all things to serve Him aright, will hardly, in the nature of things, be greatly troubled with apprehensions about hereafter.¹ May it not also be said that, to dwell upon those doctrines which are supposed to give security of future salvation to a Christian as being, above all others, main and essential, is rather to impair than to strengthen his Christianity, by introducing into it some taint of selfish

¹ The late Madame Necker, a daughter of Saussure the great naturalist, and a woman of singularly deep and ardent piety, was once asked whether she was not sometimes afraid that God might after all leave her to perish. She replied very calmly in the negative, and added, with a smile, "*J'ai trop causé avec lui.*"

aim? Christianity proper, as I have already said, has no ulterior objects in view, no ends or motives beyond itself. It loves truth and goodness, purity and holiness, entirely for their own sakes; loves and practises them at all risks; so that even although the want of some further knowledge may make life sadder, is there not reason to think that it may render it purer and holier? But whether it does so or not, we must make up our minds to take things as we find them. It is plainly the case that the doctrines now referred to stand upon a lower basis of evidence than those facts of experience on which the argument of this paper has been mainly founded. It has not pleased God, who best knows our frame and nature, to reveal to us either the mysterious means by which salvation is effected and secured, or the prospects of the Christian life, its consequences and ultimate results, with the same clearness and directness that He has made known the truths which bear upon its practice; and it can serve no good purpose to make-believe, by strong and confident assertion, that we have more perfect assurance regarding them than we really possess.

If any of my readers still recoil from thus looking at Christianity as something apart from Christian theology, I may draw their attention to the fact that this way of thinking seems to be sanctioned by the original teachers of the Gospel. In a remarkable

passage in the writings of St. Paul, we find him complaining of some of his converts for having fallen into disagreements and disputes in regard to matters of religious belief, and he takes occasion thereupon, in pointing out to them the means of Christian unity, to set forth what he regards as the only true grounds of faith. The passage is a singular instance of philosophical acumen. He tells them that Christianity is not a new scheme of philosophy or wisdom, in the Greek sense of the word, *i.e.*, not an investigation of causes or reasons in theology, not a theory or general view of religious truth, in which everything is systematized and accounted for, but (using an odd, but pithy and expressive phrase) he declares it to be a mere enacting of the crier or herald (*κήρυγμα*),—in other words, it merely professes to state or proclaim facts. "The Greeks," he says, "seek after wisdom, but we (the Apostles) declare Christ crucified," *i.e.* (as I understand it), "We set forth the observed effects, as these were best exhibited in the life, death, and character of Christ, of abjuring or making nothing of self."¹ Christianity, then, being merely a statement of facts fully ascer-

¹ This clause has of course been in general otherwise interpreted, but whatever be the particular meaning attached to it, it no way affects the assertion of the apostle, that Christianity is not a philosophical scheme but a body of facts, or the reasoning which he founds on this view of the religion which he taught.

32 *If the Gospels are mythical—what then?*

tained, is an appeal to men's observation and experience, and not properly to their reasoning at all—*i.e.*, not to their speculative or theorizing faculty. It therefore affords no room for disputes, and these are entirely out of place in connexion with it. What St. Paul teaches on this point is, in short, nothing else but an anticipation of what has since become so familiar to us by the writings of Lord Bacon; and if duly attended to and followed out, it would soon be as effective for good in religion as the *Novum Organon* has long been in science. Before Bacon's time, what was then called science was made up in great measure of theoretical deductions; and disputation was as rife in regard to scientific questions as it has ever been in religion. But the men of science humbly submitted themselves to Lord Bacon's instruction, and from that time science has advanced apace, and disputes among scientific men, at least upon matters of science proper, are nearly unknown. It might have been the same in religion, for the lesson, as we have seen, was taught earlier in it than in science. But, unhappily, those who ought to have been St. Paul's pupils did not so well appreciate his precepts.





